

Thankful in Un-Thankful Times

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

I don't think that it is cynical or jaded to say that I don't see expressions of thankfulness in my daily life. Just yesterday, driving downtown, I saw car stop at a pedestrian crossing; no acknowledgment at all. Sure, the pedestrian had the right of way to cross, but I was taught as a child the importance of expressing gratitude often. Even more, that it is a spiritual practice to say thank you. It is so human, though, to forget to say thank you.

It is the work of God's kin-dom building, giving thanks for the gifts we receive in daily life, and then to express thanks in all we do. Not everyone was taught that, sadly.

All the more important that we heed those divine words: *Love Our Neighbours, no exceptions*. The great religious traditions all teach this, but, of course, fewer people align with a faith tradition. Those "I'm Spiritual but not Religious" folks. Let me say, though, that there are countless kind and loving people in the world who do not subscribe to Christianity, or Buddhism, or Judaism.

I am so thankful, though, that when I grew up, I learned from elders around me the modelling of kindness, the regular expressions of gratitude and generosity lived out. We reinforce "love" for one another. A spiritual practice. I fear that this disconnected, stressful, culture we live in does not teach young or old that, to coin the famous phrase, *We ARE to be the change we want in our world*.

Many will gather around tables or living rooms, thankfully enjoying some special meal together. Some meals will be large, and take great effort to prepare, some will be quite simple. Sentiments of thanksgiving shared, but, I wonder, what will we be thankful for?



¹ Here is an image seen more these days. Families joining a gathering not just in person, but some connected by the blessing of technology. There it is, the device – whether a laptop or tablet or cell phone – once relegated to the study, now in the middle of a family dinner. We have had to become resilient and resourceful as the pressures of pandemic have fragmented us, we have had to find new ways to connect.

So what are we thankful for on Thanksgiving weekend? Thankful for family, for food. Implied in that expression of gratitude, though, is an acknowledgment many more in our world who are not so blessed.

Every Thanksgiving weekend included a special dinner that included my family as well as my grandfather and his siblings, my great uncles and great aunt. God bless my

¹ <https://www.mibluesperspectives.com/stories/for-you/why-a-healthy-thanksgiving-has-an-entirely-new-meaning-this-year>

mother, the extraordinary cook and baker. There was an atmosphere of safety and comfort there.

Then, as now, we were, and are now, aware of famines and droughts in our world. We lifted those strangers in the Blessing. What we could not anticipate decades ago was the increasing food insecurity, the need for Food Banks. Did you know that the first Food Bank opened in Edmonton in 1981? Now, there are over 800 food banks across Canada, and more than 3,000 food programs.² There has been a 20% increase usage of Food Banks since COVID came to be part of our regular conversation. I say all this to point out that hunger has come close to home – to our downtowns, but also into suburban neighbourhoods.

I invite us, you and me, to ponder *what are we thankful for?* As we enjoy gatherings of loved ones large and small, do we feel gratitude not just for the comfort and safety, but also feel the tug to translate that gratitude into generosity, in some way?



³ I found this story about an animal shelter offering thanksgiving dinners to their furry friends. Dogs up for adoption at Stevens Swan Humane Society in Utica, NY get a Thanksgiving meal, thanks to local couple Hillary and Rob Dunn. Each dog gets a plate of plain white meat turkey without skin or bones, canned and no salt added green beans, and plain canned pumpkin. "...this isn't food you would cook for yourself," Hillary says. "It has to be very plain, not like table scraps."

This image captures for me the resilient force that is thankfulness. Like Jesus seeing people, truly noticing people ignored by most. Paul, locked in a jail cell, yet always the prolific writer shamelessly pouring into letters his gratitude for his friends and for what God has done for him, in spite of being in jail. Actively seeking out, noticing people, creatures, and connecting with them, being generous with our kindness. It might be volunteering time, or making a donation, or buying someone a treat, or pouring out into prayer our thankfulness.

I have had the privilege of being invited several times to serve thanksgiving dinners in shelters and missions. Those of you who have had this opportunity, the first time: anxious, because for some of us a soup kitchen or shelter is not at all familiar or safe. But especially in one setting where I was allowed to sit and talk with people, I felt connected, we were all connected. I have to be honest, I haven't made time to reach out like that in recent times.

² There are many articles discussing this tragic trend of individuals and families faced with crisis and needing to depend on Food Banks: <https://activehistory.ca/2015/08/food-insecurity-and-the-temporary-relief-of-food-banks/>

³ <https://www.newyorkupstate.com/central-ny/2020/12/upstate-ny-couple-serves-thanksgiving-dinners-to-over-200-shelter-animals-photos.html>

I think that we grieve for friends, family, strangers, who suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. I think that we all yearn to connect, to turn our gratitude into generosity, and not just this weekend but every day.

So here is my invitation to all of us: seek one new way to convert thanksgiving into generosity: it could be to volunteer, or to make a donation, or praying for a local or global organization. This is a Thanksgiving invitation to *translate our gratitude into a tangible act of generosity*. It doesn't take long to find people and places needing love: rebuilding communities in Newfoundland and the Maritimes, Florida, Pakistan. More locally, where encounters with hunger and addiction cut us to the core. Perhaps Spirit is prodding us to love: connect with a local agency that supports the most vulnerable – Réseau Access Network or the Elgin St Mission, or your local food bank. The St. Andrew's Reaching Out team partners with various agencies helping those who are vulnerable as winter approaches.

How about Sudbury Animal Shelter, the SPCA in Sudbury? How about *Turtle Pond Wildlife Centre*, an amazing wildlife sanctuary in Greater Sudbury that we found when we were looking for a home for a sick raccoon foraging in our yard. Dale, a leader here at St. Andrew's, is a Board member and I'd be happy to connect you with her to give you more information about Turtle Pond – email or call me.

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians from jail. There are great scholarly debates about where he was incarcerated when he wrote it. Whether he was in Rome or Ephesus, I'm thinking it means less than recognizing how thankful he is, and how he expresses it. He could easily be complaining, yet there he is, acknowledging the work of faithful followers of Jesus, men and women – encouraging them to be reconciled with one another.

We have this gift, the teachings of Jesus, and a community where we model for one another Christ Love. In a culture that does not affirm kindness, vulnerability, unconditional love of everyone, no exceptions, we have this gift, this teaching, this spiritual discipline of regularly expressing gratitude to one another.

Jesus also teaches us to receive kindness, to feel love. So, whatever gathering we might have, large or small, let us be thankful for our blessings, but then translate thankfulness into generosity. Connect outside our comfort zones – even if it as simple as saying to someone on the street trying to keep warm, saying as Jesus did so often: "Hello. I see you. I care." Amen.